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EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE PROGRAMME OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

Fifty-first session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 546th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Tuesday, 3 October 2000, at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. KHORRAM (Islamic Republic of Iran)

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GE.00-03224 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 3.20 p.m.

ANNUAL THEME: UNHCR@50: FROM RESPONSE TO SOLUTIONS (agenda item 4) (continued) (A/AC.96/938)

1. Mr. NOIRFALISSE (Belgium) said that no effort was too great to ensure the security of humanitarian workers. In that regard, the speedy ratification of the Statute of the International Criminal Court was important. Belgium's Prime Minister had called for a concerted approach to the problems of asylum and immigration, inter alia, through European Community institutions, in which UNHCR and the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees should play a vital part. Belgium had been one of the architects of the Convention and had supported UNHCR activities domestically and throughout the world. Its authority in matters of protection was of the highest. Cooperation between the Belgian General Commission for Refugees and Stateless Persons and UNHCR was particularly valuable.

2. Belgium's foreign policy focus on poverty eradication, sustainable development and the defence of human rights had been further stressed by the Deputy Prime Minister of Belgium, speaking recently in New York. In that context, Belgium supported the idea of a consultation process designed to revitalize the idea of protection. The coming year, the fiftieth anniversary of the Convention, had also been designated the Year of Dialogue among Civilizations by the United Nations. Belgium, which would hold the presidency of the European Union during that year, would take the opportunity to give effect to the recommendations on asylum, migration and development cooperation made at the Tampere Summit. The Deputy Prime Minister had also stressed the need to mobilize the international community to deal with the situation in Central Africa; Belgium would continue to support efforts in that region.

3. Belgium was aware of the budget problems faced by UNHCR, which would have to plan its activities according to the resources available to it. With regard to contributions, moreover, greater attention to forecasting was required. On that subject, the Belgian Secretariat for Development Cooperation had drawn up, together with UNHCR, a framework agreement putting Belgium's voluntary contributions on a four-yearly basis. The Belgian authorities were satisfied with the methodology UNHCR had followed in the past two years for improving its programme reporting cycle.

4. Mr. MOUSSA SOLANO (Observer for Guinea) conveyed the appreciation expressed by Guinea's Head of State, General Conte, to Mrs. Ogata for the remarkable work which she had done during her term of office and which had benefited the Government and people of Guinea, as well as the refugees there.

5. For 11 years, armed conflict in the region, particularly in Liberia and Sierra Leone, had led to growing numbers of refugees; over 1 million had benefited from asylum and traditional hospitality in Guinea, where everything possible had been done to ease their suffering and distress. But such a prolonged, large-scale presence had had adverse environmental, economic, physical and social effects, exacerbated at times by cross-border incursions by armed insurgents, often disguised as refugees. Since 1993, Guinea had been suffering from such incursions and from the killings, property destruction, plundering and livestock rustling that had made large sections of the Guinean population homeless and impoverished. Many of those responsible were

RUF insurgents and groups from Liberia and other countries. In the past month alone, there had been over 200 deaths; the victims had included Mr. Mensah Kpognon, head of the UNHCR office in Macenta prefecture. Another UNHCR official working in Côte d'Ivoire, Mrs. Laurence Djéya, had been kidnapped in Guinea and later released in Monrovia, thus implying Liberian Government involvement. The Guinean Head of State and the Government expressed their deepest regrets to the High Commissioner for such tragedies. As the Executive Director of WFP had said, all States or individuals who deliberately committed such barbaric acts should be liable to economic and criminal sanctions imposed by the international community.

6. Despite its limited resources, the Guinean Government continued its efforts to alleviate the victims' suffering. Such efforts included an awareness campaign and close contacts throughout the national territory, especially in refugee areas. Refugees and Guineans alike continued to suffer from armed incursions; several dozen refugees had been killed in a recent attack on a camp carried out by drugged gangs, whose leaders were obviously determined to discourage international humanitarian efforts in the region and were violently opposed to peace and development. The Guinean Government nevertheless remained committed to all international instruments relating to the rights of refugees and stateless persons and would continue to provide protection for those on its soil, particularly those who had fled from Liberia and Sierra Leone. Its lack of resources continued to be a major concern, however, and it therefore appealed for continued assistance, particularly with regard to security, and hoped that the measures outlined by the High Commissioner in her opening statement could be implemented. It thanked the UNHCR delegation in Guinea for its unflagging and invaluable efforts and reiterated its readiness to continue collaborating with it and all other humanitarian agencies.

7. Mr. KYRÖLÄINEN (Finland) said that his delegation fully associated itself with the statement made on behalf of the European Union and endorsed the expressions of gratitude and appreciation to the High Commissioner. One outstanding example of the success achieved by UNHCR was Mozambique, whose uprooted population had been able to return home.

8. His delegation shared the High Commissioner's frustration about unresolved crises, especially in Central and West Africa, Chechnya and Timor. In order to cope with such challenges, UNHCR had had to develop flexible and innovative approaches. His delegation supported the efforts to strengthen UNHCR's emergency preparedness and response capacity, as well as the measures taken to create a secure environment for refugees and to ensure the safety of staff in humanitarian operations; it looked forward to further discussion, including the consideration of the Brahimi report, in that regard. Security should be treated as the system-wide problem that it was.

9. The gap between humanitarian and development assistance, called for attention by all involved, including the creation of new partnerships and further financial support. Finland shared the High Commissioner's concern about funding, particularly the effect of cuts on policy priorities such as women and children. Donors should ensure that UNHCR receive the necessary long-term support.

10. Mr. GERDTS (Germany) expressed his Government's sympathy with the families and colleagues of UNHCR staff recently murdered on humanitarian missions in Guinea and West Timor. Member States which had mandated UNHCR had a responsibility to help safeguard the lives of its staff and, where preventive measures had failed, should at least do everything in their power to bring the perpetrators to justice and put pressure on their supporters.

11. His delegation endorsed the statement made on behalf of the European Union, which had pertinently drawn attention to UNHCR's challenges and responses. The new challenges stemming from the growth and changing nature of conflicts during the past decade called for speedier responses and more effective coordination by UNHCR. Lessons could be drawn from the Great Lakes and Balkans crises, including the paramount importance of the exclusively humanitarian and civilian character of refugee camps, the need to strengthen UNHCR's management capacity and the strict clarification of mandates and responsibilities. Likewise essential, however, was the political will to create and impose a framework that would enable UNHCR's protection mandate to be fulfilled. Bridging the gap between relief work and sustainable development would greatly enhance conflict prevention and peace-building. In that context, his delegation welcomed the Brookings process and looked forward to the results of the first country pilot studies. Preventing crises and consequent refugee flows should remain a high priority. Accordingly, Germany had set up training facilities for civilian personnel, open to representatives of other countries. The Balkans was a good example of post-conflict peace-building. The measures taken included the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe, to which Germany had made a substantial contribution in finance and manpower. In all such efforts, in any country or region, respect for human rights was essential for peace.

12. During and after the war in the former Yugoslavia, Germany had hosted several hundred thousand refugees, mostly from Bosnia and Herzegovina and more recently from Kosovo, having spent tens of billions of dollars in addition to its UNHCR and other United Nations contributions. It currently hosted the largest number of refugees in Europe and remained one of the major donors of humanitarian assistance around the world. Earlier in the year, the Federal Parliament had set up a National Commission on Immigration which would, inter alia, formulate proposals on immigration, the integration of foreigners and the coexistence of different groups.

13. Lastly, he expressed his Government's sincere thanks to Mrs. Ogata for her outstanding efforts during her term of office.

14. Mr. MARIELA (Chile) endorsed the expressions of appreciation to the High Commissioner.

15. The tragic events in West Timor and Guinea had bereaved not only the victims' families and UNHCR, but the entire world. The sacrifice would surely not have been in vain and he was certain that, in future, humanitarian workers would receive the resources and security guarantees they needed to carry out their selfless work.

16. As a country with a long tradition of providing asylum in the Latin America region, Chile reiterated its readiness to cooperate in UNHCR's humanitarian work. The 22.3 million refugees located in 150 countries around the world represented a moral challenge for which every country should share the responsibility. In her introductory statement, Mrs. Ogata had indicated which

direction was to be taken with regard to the current agenda item, entitled "UNHCR@50: from response to solutions". As a party to the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the Protocol thereto, Chile continued to collaborate actively in UNHCR's activities. In January 1999, the Government had drawn up an agreement on the resettlement of refugees in Chile and had begun the first stage of a programme to settle a group of families from the former Yugoslavia; some initial difficulties of the kind inherent in complex human relations, had not deterred the authorities from proceeding to the second stage and a large group of refugees would be settled in Chile in the coming months.

17. Mr. BÖSENBACHER (Hungary) paid tribute to the High Commissioner and the staff of her Office. His delegation shared the sorrow and outrage at the brutal murder of UNHCR staff members in West Timor and Guinea; efforts must be made to end the culture of impunity that allowed such violence to prevail and to strengthen the protection of those carrying out humanitarian work.

18. Crises of different natures - religious, ethnic and racial - had multiplied in recent years and the resulting refugee problem had become a key political issue that called for open, frank and constructive dialogue with Governments, NGOs and refugee experts, both to reaffirm the Convention's fundamental role and to address the current system's shortcomings. Abuse of asylum procedure was becoming a serious matter because of the traffic in human beings and the difficulty of determining the limit between legal migration and protection under the Convention. The integrity of the institution of asylum must be upheld through measures to exclude from refugee protection those not entitled to it. Without the speedy and effective screening of asylum claims, there could be no effective international protection.

19. His delegation therefore welcomed the proposal for global consultations, which should include exclusion and cessation provisions, criteria for temporary protection, burden-sharing, State and public security implications and international cooperation to deal with rejected asylum seekers. It particularly appreciated the High Commissioner's efforts to increase the number of States parties to the Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness and was carefully considering ways to accede to them. It had also withdrawn its geographical reservation to the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.

20. During the 10 years since its establishment, the UNHCR branch office in Budapest had greatly assisted refugees seeking asylum in Hungary and had helped in the preparation of draft legislation and the implementation of the Convention. His delegation reiterated its appreciation for the High Commissioner's efforts and commitment during her term of office.

21. Mr. RODRIGUEZ CEDEÑO (Venezuela) expressed his delegation's appreciation for the work which Mrs. Ogata had carried out during her term of office as High Commissioner and which had done so much to ease the refugee problem throughout the world and pave the way for further progress.

22. The refugee problem was a matter of increasing concern. UNHCR was caring for over 21 million people throughout the world, uprooted both within and beyond their own borders, while instead of decreasing, crises continued to grow in number. In efforts to alleviate the problems, UNHCR had played a fundamental role in the 50 years of its existence, but it

would have to adapt in view of the changing nature and pattern of refugee flows. The fundamental institution of asylum and other forms of protection had to be strengthened and the safety of humanitarian personnel in the field guaranteed. His Government deeply deplored the attacks on such persons and was distressed not only at the continued occurrence of such acts, but at the failure to apprehend and punish those responsible. It hoped that the perpetrators could be brought to international justice, and that the recently established International Criminal Court would soon be operational for that purpose.

23. The refugee problem should not be considered only in the light of the immediate issue of protection, but should also focus on the establishment of peace and stability, reconciliation or coexistence, and sustainable development in countries of origin, with a view to the ultimate safe repatriation of displaced persons. Experience pointed to the need to go beyond immediate assistance and take long-term requirements into account - an approach requiring positive international coordinated action of the kind that UNHCR's work undoubtedly fostered.

24. The forced displacement of persons throughout the world concerned not only the States directly involved, but the international community as a whole. UNHCR could and should play a fundamental role in the coordinated action required. Effort-sharing was vital, as was the sharing of responsibility, which should be approached strictly according to the principle of international solidarity in providing international assistance and basic protection. International protection was the very reason for UNHCR's existence and underlay the preparation of the relevant rules and principles of international law. Protection should be constantly improved by strengthening existing institutions and devising other effective and acceptable safeguards for displaced persons. His Government reiterated its support for UNHCR. Its commitment to respecting the rights of forcibly displaced persons was reflected in domestic measures such as the establishment of a technical commission to screen requests and the conclusion of an agreement with Colombia to deal with internally displaced persons in transit.

25. Mr. MOHAMMED (Nigeria) said that his Government had been profoundly saddened by the recent murders of UNHCR staff members and called for mechanisms to be put in place to ensure the safety of humanitarian workers. Throughout its 50-year history, UNHCR had remained dynamic and innovative in the search for solutions. Nevertheless humanitarian and refugee protection principles had occasionally been compromised. UNHCR had frequently been left with no option but to provide assistance in the midst of armed conflict, with staff working in insecure situations and inadequate access to displaced populations. The militarization of camps was another serious threat to refugees and humanitarian workers alike.

26. Reach Out initiatives were very useful in reminding States of their international obligations and efforts should be made to enhance the capacity of first countries of asylum. New complexities necessitated collaborative efforts with other bodies and United Nations agencies in which UNHCR should continue to play a lead role. Relationships with NGOs needed to be strengthened and local responses to refugee issues should be enhanced. Awareness-raising activities and partnerships with regional, subregional, and private-sector organizations should also continue.

27. The location of camps close to borders and the militarization of camps were significant risk factors. Some States were unable to provide adequate security, especially in

poverty-stricken sub-Saharan Africa. In the spirit of international solidarity and burden-sharing, UNHCR and the international community should provide advice, training, technical assistance and funds to deal with the problem. Accordingly, Nigeria supported the development of a protocol to the 1994 Convention on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel.

28. UNHCR's role in the development and reconstruction of post-conflict areas with a view to ensuring that peace was maintained following the return of refugees was to be commended. However, certain shortcomings needed to be pointed out. Although about one third of the world's refugees were located in Africa, that statistic was not reflected in commensurate funding or crisis-response capacity. The international community and donor countries should heed the appeals of the High Commissioner for increased funding of programmes in various regions of Africa.

29. Finally, peace-building should be incorporated into the arsenal of solutions to refugee problems. The inauguration of Peace Education programmes in post-conflict States and refugee camps was a step towards encouraging coexistence and sustainable peace. For its part, the international community needed to restrict the flow of arms, help to demobilize armed groups and prosecute persons guilty of crimes against humanity.

30. Mr. AL AGHBASH (Sudan) said that, unless the safety of humanitarian officers could be guaranteed, it would be impossible to protect the women and children who accounted for the bulk of refugees and victims of conflict. The Sudan had consistently denounced the targeting and killing of United Nations and other staff in the field and expressed its condolences to the families of the recently murdered UNHCR staff.

31. In December 1998, the Sudan had hosted the Organization of African Unity (OAU) Ministerial Conference on Refugees, Returnees and Displaced Persons in Africa. African countries, the United Nations and the international community should implement the recommendations and declaration of that Conference and thus put an end to the continent's refugee problems. In addition, his Government had concluded agreements to repatriate Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees, although the situation had taken another turn for the worse during the fighting in the region earlier in the year. Efforts were also being made to encourage the voluntary repatriation of refugees to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda and Chad.

32. A meeting had been held in Addis Ababa in August 2000 to discuss the question of certain Ethiopians in the Sudan whose refugee status had been curtailed. It had been agreed that their repatriation would begin on 1 December 2000 and that the two sides would settle the issue of the remaining caseload on a bilateral basis. UNHCR representatives had pledged to rehabilitate the refugee-affected areas and the refugee camps before handing them over to the Sudanese authorities.

33. The Sudan was committed to protecting and caring for refugees in its territory and it trusted that Sudanese refugees in neighbouring countries would receive equal treatment. Unfortunately, attacks on refugee camps and the use of refugee children in armed conflicts were continuing. The rebel Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) had continued to disregard all relevant resolutions and agreements.

34. Recent years had witnessed a decline in international assistance for refugees. Furthermore, the earmarking of contributions from donor countries had undermined UNHCR's capacity to implement refugee programmes. The present pledging system whereby funds were donated to specific projects in individual countries meant, for example, that one refugee in Europe received the same level of funding as hundreds of African refugees. UNHCR should be permitted a free hand in allocating funds according to its priorities. Additionally, it was regrettable that UNHCR had decided to phase out the entitlement to refugee status of certain Ethiopian nationals currently in the Sudan. The decision ignored the practical difficulty of discontinuing refugee status when so many of the Sudan's neighbours were beset by internal conflicts which constantly generated refugee flows.

35. Mr. LOMONGIN (Observer for Kenya) said that his Government had been shocked by the recent murder of UNHCR staff members in West Timor and wholeheartedly endorsed measures to enhance the safety of field officers.

36. When refugees had started to arrive in Kenya in large numbers in the early 1990s, the Kenyan authorities had lacked the necessary resources and expertise to deal with the problem. His Government was grateful for the prompt assistance that had been offered by UNHCR and the international community. It was to be noted, however, that resources had dwindled and refugees' basic needs were often not met. Any peaceful initiative aimed at solving the problem of forced migration deserved support. Accordingly, his Government endorsed the Burundi peace initiative, the recent developments in Somalia and efforts to break the deadlock in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The recent ceasefire between Ethiopia and Eritrea was another welcome development.

37. Mr. MIGUIL (Observer for Djibouti) said that his Government had been saddened and angered by the recent murders of UNHCR staff. Djibouti had experienced refugee problems ever since independence, to the extent that refugees accounted for 37 per cent of the national population. Clearly, the refugee problem in Djibouti impeded the country's social and economic development. The annual meeting of the Executive Committee enabled Djibouti to keep abreast of new developments with regard to the management of refugee flows.

38. UNHCR needed to redefine its mandate and rethink its objectives in the light of experience. In that connection, developed countries should recognize that refugee flows were often caused by the grinding poverty that existed in developing countries. For too long, perhaps, the international community had idealized the capacity of international organizations to solve the world's problems. Mindful of those limitations, the President of Djibouti had become personally involved in efforts to find a solution to the difficult situation in neighbouring Somalia. Furthermore, with a view to guaranteeing internal stability and forestalling a potential outflow of Djiboutian refugees, a peace agreement ending an internal rebellion had been signed in February 2000. Djibouti's efforts within the framework of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) were directed towards the same objectives.

39. The recent conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea had resulted in a new influx of refugees into Djibouti and, accordingly, his Government renewed its appeal for financial assistance to cope with the problem. Solutions to refugee problems should be shared solutions.

40. Mr. ALEMU (Ethiopia) said that Ethiopia and the subregion had been in a state of war and conflict for most of the last 30 years. Given the resulting mass displacements of people, there was every reason to be grateful to UNHCR for its assistance. UNHCR had been instrumental in ensuring that the hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians who had fled their country in the past were able to return.

41. Ethiopia had also been the first country of asylum for hundreds of thousands of refugees from elsewhere. UNHCR had helped there, too, but it had not always had the resources to help carry out tasks such as voluntary repatriation more effectively. That was still the case today.

42. Ethiopia shared the deep indignation felt over the recent brutal murders of UNHCR staff members, one of whom had himself been Ethiopian. Ethiopia called for urgent measures to ensure full protection for all United Nations humanitarian personnel everywhere.

43. Mr. PEREZ-VILLANUEVA (Spain) said that Spain fully endorsed the statement made by the representative of France on behalf of the European Union. It also regarded the 1951 Convention as the cornerstone of international refugee protection and supported the initiatives that had been taken to deal with the problems of its implementation in a new and changing context.

44. It was important to protect the institution of asylum. The increase in groundless asylum applications created suspicion among public opinion in host countries. It was essential to protect those who needed protection while maintaining the integrity of migration policies. One of Spain's chief concerns in that regard was the growth of trafficking rings.

45. The maintenance of strict status-determination procedures inevitably ate into resources that might otherwise be used in caring for refugees and he requested UNHCR assistance in identifying ways of providing protection where necessary while discouraging groundless applications.

46. The growing complexity of humanitarian crises had brought many new actors onto the stage and humanitarian space had become overcrowded, frequently resulting in confusion and duplication of work. Partnership was fundamental to finding satisfactory responses to the refugee problem.

47. The recent tragic events in West Timor and Guinea had highlighted the question of the security of humanitarian workers. All States must share the responsibility for guaranteeing their safety, which must now be a matter of the highest priority.

48. Peace and respect for human rights were the best means of forestalling the need to seek refuge and protection outside one's own country. Spain attached particular importance to international conflict-resolution mechanisms and, particularly during the phase between relief and reconstruction, to peace-building processes, including rehabilitation and reconciliation programmes developed by the international community.

49. With regard to UNHCR's finances, the establishment of a set of principles to guide donors had been an important step forward. In the current situation, it was necessary to ensure that resources were not allocated to humanitarian crises that happened to be under the media spotlight, at the expense of more long-term conflicts that were less topical.

50. Lastly, he paid tribute to the developing countries that took in enormous numbers of refugees despite their lack of domestic resources.

51. Ms. LAZAROVA-TRAJKOVSKA (Observer for the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) said that, over the past 10 years, her country had gained enormous practical experience in finding solutions to refugee problems. In 1999, for example, it had taken in over 360,000 Kosovo refugees, a burden that had been far from easy to bear. Most had now returned to Kosovo and, at present, there were 6,062 people from Kosovo and Serbia, the majority of them Roma, in the country under temporary protection. Everything had been done to regulate the protected status of such persons, to monitor their stay in the country and to facilitate their voluntary return.

52. According to reports from UNHCR, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), conditions in Kosovo were still not right for the permanent return of those at present in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, especially the non-Albanians. Her Government had therefore extended their temporary protection until 28 March 2001. The most pressing task now was for the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) to prepare the way for their return and help promote coexistence.

53. Her Government had made significant improvements to the legal framework for the recognition of refugees. The 1951 Convention had been ratified in 1994 and a new Asylum Act was expected to be adopted shortly, with implementation beginning early in 2001. She expressed gratitude to UNHCR for its help in drafting the Act and preparing for its implementation, as well as assisting with amendments to the Nationality Act.

54. Mr. TROJAN (Observer for the European Commission) endorsed the statement made by the representative of France on behalf of the European Union and conveyed the Commission's grief at the recent murders of UNHCR colleagues.

55. An exchange of letters had taken place between the European Commission and UNHCR in July 2000. Its aim was to strengthen their partnership with a view to devising fair, balanced and effective legislation in matters of asylum and refugees. A process of harmonization of legislation had also begun, along the lines agreed at the Special European Council meeting held in Tampere in October 1999, and the European Commission had submitted two proposals of significance for European asylum and immigration policy: one was a draft directive on the right to family reunion, which related chiefly to recognized refugees; the other was a proposal to establish a European Fund for Refugees as a means of ensuring a balance of efforts between member States in welcoming refugees and displaced persons and bearing the consequences of their reception. The latter proposal had recently been adopted. A proposal had also been submitted for a directive on temporary protection in the event of a mass influx of displaced persons, a measure that included solidarity mechanisms between member States.

56. The Commission had recently adopted a directive on minimum standards for the granting and withdrawal of refugee status as a first step in implementation of a common European asylum regime and would shortly be submitting a proposal for a directive on minimum standards for reception of asylum-seekers. At the same time, work was continuing on legislation governing the criteria and mechanisms applied by States in considering asylum applications. Two papers would shortly be published, one on a common asylum procedure and the other analysing migratory flows and their impact on immigration policies.

57. Political representatives should be seeking ways of meeting the challenges presented by an influx of asylum-seekers and refugees: in that regard, it was vital to continue to combat racism, discrimination and xenophobia.

58. In line with its commitment to genuine partnership with key humanitarian actors, the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) financed a large number of NGO projects. At the same time, UNHCR was the single most important recipient of ECHO funding, so that the Commission was in a prime position to facilitate partnership between UNHCR and humanitarian NGOs.

59. Lastly, he said the European Commission was prepared to help strengthen UNHCR's emergency preparation and response capability, including through training and by building up telecommunications networks. A process of strategic programming had begun between the Commission and UNHCR, which should ensure more predictable and coherent funding for UNHCR's operations.

60. Mr. TESSENYI (Council of Europe) said that the Council of Europe would continue to work closely with UNHCR to strengthen the institution of asylum. Refugees themselves, as had already been suggested earlier, should be partners in reforming the system of protection.

61. The Council of Europe was one of the four agencies responsible for the extended follow-up to the CIS Conference process. By way of illustration, it had been working in Moldova with UNHCR, Parliament and other government representatives and NGOs on draft refugee legislation. That was only one example where the interests and work of UNHCR and the Council coincided with regard to the strengthening of the institution of asylum.

62. Referring to the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe, he said that the Council was represented at the meeting of Working Table III, which was addressing, among other things, asylum and migration questions. The international community could save a good deal of time and resources by drawing on the years of experience gained in the framework of the CIS Conference process.

63. The Council of Europe had recently adopted recommendations on the arrival of asylum-seekers at European airports, on family reunion for refugees and other persons in need of international protection and on temporary protection. It was also involved in standard-setting, partly through European Court of Human Rights decisions, such as two recent ones on expulsion and family life, and partly by focusing on areas such as the detention of asylum-seekers and subsidiary or complementary protection. It also planned to consider the situation of refugee women and restrictions on asylum in member States.

64. Ms. ALTYNSHASH (Observer for Kazakhstan), speaking on behalf of the delegations of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, expressed her condolences to the families of the recently murdered UNHCR personnel.

65. Progress on the issue of refugees and forcibly displaced persons in the Central Asian region was attributable to cooperation with UNHCR and Kazakhstan's recent accession to the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol demonstrated its commitment to solving refugee problems and its intention to abide by relevant international standards. Technical assistance provided by UNHCR had also been extremely valuable in formulating domestic legislation on refugee issues. With UNHCR's help, her Government had successfully repatriated thousands of Tajik refugees and the process was continuing despite financial constraints.

66. The geopolitical situation of the Central Asian States, the vastness of the region and the porous nature of international borders in the area unfortunately favoured the activities of international traffickers in drugs, people and weapons. The conflict in Afghanistan, the growth of religious extremism and the intensification of international terrorism were potential ingredients for massive refugee movements into Kazakhstan in the near future. However, the Executive Committee had paid scant attention to the situation in Central Asia. Although increases in funding were always welcome, certain measures to avert refugee crises did not have to be expensive. For example, greater attention to forecasting and early-warning mechanisms could pay handsome dividends. To that end, Kazakhstan was particularly interested in developing an integrated information network to cover all aspects of migration and population movement.

67. Mr. BENJELLOUN-TOUIMI (Morocco) said that the international instruments and mechanisms established since the creation of UNHCR to regulate the status of refugees remained relevant today, despite the changing historical context. Nevertheless, they were now subject to unprecedented pressure. The 2 million refugees existing in 1951 had lived in the richest countries in the world. Now the majority of the millions of refugees lived in developing countries, some of them in sub-Saharan Africa, which often faced enormous economic and social difficulties. International organizations and NGOs were finding it increasingly difficult to mobilize resources for those refugees, particularly in the case of mass influxes, as in Kosovo or Timor, which swallowed up enormous amounts. The international community must not forget the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, which, despite their difficult economic circumstances, demonstrated exemplary solidarity by taking in thousands of refugees.

68. He welcomed the UNHCR initiative to organize consultations in order to revitalize the legal system in the area of international protection; that should make it possible to identify ways to implement effective and durable solutions to refugee problems. Voluntary repatriation was undoubtedly the preferred solution, as long as the refugees were free to express their wishes without having to worry about their own or their family's safety. Unfortunately, in some parts of the world where refugees were kept in camps for decades, they were often not in a position to express their wishes freely. That aspect of the implementation of voluntary repatriation should certainly be examined in the consultations. Practical solutions must be explored and quickly implemented in order to alleviate the suffering of refugees, which had lasted too long.

69. He expressed solidarity with the staff of UNHCR following the recent tragic attacks on staff members in Asia and Africa and condemned in the strongest possible terms all attacks on humanitarian workers. UNHCR staff were doing an outstanding job in often difficult conditions and it was vital for UNHCR, the United Nations, States and non-governmental organizations to hold urgent talks on how best to protect humanitarian workers.

70. Mr. MACHUNGWA (Observer for Zambia) said that a change of approach in the ongoing efforts by UNHCR to identify sustainable solutions to the world refugee crisis was inevitable. Indeed, since its creation, UNHCR had been obliged to adapt its approach to the changing world refugee problem. While there was plenty of evidence of successful UNHCR programmes around the world, he was concerned about the glaring imbalance in the assistance given by the international community to African refugees as compared with that given to refugees from other parts of the world, even though all refugees had more or less the same needs. UNHCR's dedication to the cause of refugees was all the more admirable given the constraints of inadequate funding and the security risks faced by its staff. He strongly condemned the killing of humanitarian workers and said that his Government would support initiatives to improve their safety around the world.

71. The economic difficulties facing most African States, compounded by their heavy debt burden and intractable civil wars in some countries, meant that they were unable to manage their refugee populations effectively. Warring between factions and the profits to be made from supplying weapons had added to the problem. Despite that, African States were still in a position to help solve the various refugee crises on the continent by ensuring a shift from dictatorial political practices to democratic Governments, but, to do that, they needed support and goodwill. They must also continue to promote peace initiatives in order to create conditions conducive to the repatriation of refugees, but financial and technical support was needed to maintain the momentum of the peace initiatives.

72. Lastly, he paid tribute to Mrs. Sadako Ogata for placing refugees, and especially African refugees, high on the agenda of the United Nations and the international community.

73. Mr. ARNAU AVILA (Observer for Mexico) said that priority had been given in recent years in Mexico to dealing with the problem of Guatemalan refugees. During a visit to Mexico by Mrs. Sadako Ogata and in the presence of the Presidents of Mexico and Guatemala, naturalization and migrant documents had been handed over to refugees in Santo Domingo Kesté, Campeche. For the first time, the same refugees had also been given the deeds to an average of two hectares of land for each family. UNHCR had covered the costs involved in issuing those documents and the European Union had supported the development of farming projects designed to allow the refugees to be self-sufficient.

74. In the year in which UNHCR celebrated its fiftieth anniversary and the Mexican Commission for Assistance to Refugees (CONMAR) its twentieth, the Mexican Senate had ratified the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol and all documentation had been provided for Mexico's acceptance as a full member of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's programme. Also, the General Population Act had been adopted and provided for the creation of the Committee on Eligibility for Refugee Status, which would coordinate the work of all the agencies concerned.

75. To date Mexico had taken in over 200,000 refugees, who had enriched Mexican society with their cultural and economic contributions. Currently, 2,500 persons enjoyed the legal status of refugee. Mexicans not only offered a warm welcome to refugees, but also themselves went in search of a better life on the other side of Mexico's northern border. The Government policy of giving refugees Mexican nationality and land gave them a real opportunity to get on in life. Moreover, the current economic situation offered a unique opportunity to continue adapting Mexico's laws and institutions to deal more promptly and effectively with the humanitarian needs of refugees.

76. Mr. SAEEDI (Observer for Yemen) said that UNHCR had achieved a good deal in 50 years despite the many difficulties it faced and the limited resources available to it to cope with rising numbers of refugees. He thanked donor countries for their support and called on them to continue to give generously. In the previous two decades, Yemen had faced increasing instability in the Horn of Africa, but it had fulfilled its international and humanitarian responsibilities towards the refugees in its territory. It had set up a National Commission for Refugees, chaired by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, and remained committed to providing assistance and facilities for refugees despite the paucity of the resources allocated to it by UNHCR.

77. The number of refugees in Yemen was officially put at 70,000, but was probably higher. They were visited by officials from the National Commission and by UNHCR staff members and their basic needs were provided for, with some help from non-governmental organizations. Security services were provided for refugees and UNHCR staff. UNHCR and local authorities had jointly organized training and awareness-raising campaigns on refugee problems. Some Somali and Eritrean refugees had been repatriated, although even more continued to flow in. His Government was also trying to find political solutions to the refugee problem; it had acted as a mediator between warring factions in one country, as well as between countries at war, and it had organized a meeting to try to reconcile Somali factions and the elected Government of Somalia in Djibouti.

78. Yemen still faced many difficulties in offering shelter to refugees: it was one of the least developed countries and had very few financial resources, while the number of refugees was growing all the time. Officials from the National Commission received little assistance and were badly in need of training.

79. Lastly, he drew attention to the large numbers of Palestinian people who were still refugees or displaced despite all the efforts by the international community. He condemned the recent atrocities committed by Israeli troops on Palestinians and their children, which were in violation of the principles of international law, and he urged the international community to do the same.

80. Ms. ABOULNAGA (Observer for Egypt) said it had been an excellent idea to hold round tables before the current session to allow humanitarian experts to discuss subjects such as the objective link between humanitarian action and development. At one such meeting, the High Commissioner had made a comprehensive statement defining the challenges facing UNHCR given the limited resources at its disposal.

81. On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of UNHCR, she attached the highest priority to international protection and mechanisms for its implementation. There was a need to foster international solidarity in that area on the basis of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. However, a solid institutional basis for international protection could not be laid without paying attention to three questions. The first was the protection of humanitarian workers, as highlighted by the recent killings of UNHCR staff members in West Timor and Guinea; all possible efforts must be taken at every level to protect all humanitarian workers wherever they were in the world. The second question concerned the financial resources necessary to ensure the timely and fair implementation of the whole of the High Commissioner's Programme ; that would require the constructive cooperation of donors, who should not place restrictions on where the High Commissioner spent the money. The third question concerned the balanced geographical implementation of the High Commissioner's Programme; there were over 6 million refugees in Africa and she hoped that Africa would be given higher priority in future.

82. The Egyptian authorities enjoyed a very constructive and cooperative relationship with UNHCR, as shown by the choice of Cairo to house the regional office for the Middle East and Africa. She was confident that such cooperation would yield further success in the future.

83. Lastly, she agreed completely with what the observer for Yemen had said with regard to the violence inflicted on the Palestinian people by Israeli troops.

84. Ms. CEK (Observer for Croatia) paid tribute to the selfless work of the High Commissioner for Refugees and her staff, often in difficult and dangerous circumstances. The emergency aid sent by UNHCR to help the tens of thousands of refugees and displaced persons in Croatia in the first half of the 1990s, as well as the High Commissioner's personal efforts to find a permanent solution to the problem, were highly appreciated. She thanked the High Commissioner especially for leading the humanitarian response to the terrible war waged on Croatian territory in 1992 and for her efforts, during her many visits to Croatia, to speed up the return process.

85. For 50 years, UNHCR had been developing new approaches to ever more complex crises. One of those approaches involved bridging the gap between humanitarian and development assistance in post-conflict situations. In order to build a self-sustaining society following an armed conflict, development assistance was a must, since, without it, a vicious circle of dependence on international aid was easily created.

86. Her Government had put a great deal of effort into promoting the return of refugees and displaced persons to their places of residence. It was determined to overcome the remaining obstacles, but creating the conditions for sustainable return was a time-consuming and costly business. She therefore hoped that support would be forthcoming from international partners such as UNHCR and the international donor community to achieve a self-sustainable return process in Croatia.

87. She offered the condolences of her Government on the deaths of the four UNHCR staff members, one of whom had been a Croatian national, recently killed in West Timor and Guinea.

The targeting of humanitarian workers was unacceptable and she supported calls for the convening of a special session of the United Nations Security Council on that issue, as well as the adoption of specific measures by the General Assembly.

88. Ms. NYIRAMIRIMO (Observer for Rwanda) said she was particularly grateful to the High Commissioner for the understanding she had shown during her various visits to Rwanda and for her support for the country's moves towards reconstruction and national reconciliation. She expressed her condolences to the families of the four UNHCR staff members killed recently and said that the perpetrators must be brought to justice. Her Government was grateful for the considerable help it had received from United Nations agencies and those States which had come together to help Rwanda solve the problems resulting from the genocide and massacres in 1994. It was especially grateful to UNHCR and the international community for their support for programmes to reintegrate returnees and vulnerable persons and to help refugees who had found asylum in Rwanda. However, given the size of the tasks of providing housing for returnees, and orphans and those who had escaped the genocide, as well as schools, hospitals and drinking water, and her country's inability to carry them out alone, the funds allocated were insufficient. She recalled that over 3 million refugees had returned to Rwanda in recent years and called on the international community and UNHCR to continue to support the rehabilitation programmes for the thousands of people living in precarious circumstances. Several thousand Rwandan refugees and unaccompanied children were exiled in various countries, unable to return home for various reasons; she called on those countries and the international community to support her Government in its efforts to repatriate them.

89. In addition to the problems arising as a result of the genocide, Rwanda had accepted over 30,000 refugees from neighbouring countries. Most of them were living in camps and needed help to satisfy their basic needs. Her Government had already submitted to Parliament a bill on the refugees which would allow them to live in Rwanda while enjoying all necessary protection.

90. Her Government supported all efforts to find peaceful solutions to conflicts. In order to stem the flows of refugees around the world and in Africa in particular, all States had a duty to promote respect for human rights and to cooperate in improving living conditions, since poverty and the poor distribution of resources gave rise to social tension that could lead to conflict. She was grateful to the international community in general and UNHCR in particular for helping to resolve conflicts and take care of displaced persons or refugees, especially in the Great Lakes region. Her Government looked forward to receiving further assistance in its efforts to rehabilitate refugees and those handicapped, widowed, orphaned or displaced as a result of the genocide.

The meeting rose at 6.15 p.m.